**Opinion**

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**America Is Powered by Graduates—And There Aren’t Enough of Them**

**By Dr. Sandy Addis, Director, National Dropout Prevention Center**

**Anderson, S.C. (August 7, 2018) –** The American economy is prospering, it’s back-to-school time, October is National Dropout Prevention Month, and our future depends on how we understand and connect the three.

Multiple indicators reflect a welcome degree of prosperity in many sectors of the American economy.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics recently reported that over 155 million members of our population are employed with a national unemployment rate of only 3.9%. Wages are on the rise, “Help Wanted” and “Now Hiring” signs are seen in windows and on billboards, and there are increasing levels of investor optimism and consumer confidence. Yet the overall rate of labor force participation (the percent of us who work) is projected to decline in coming years due to aging and the looming retirement of our current adult population. Jobs are increasingly available for those who qualify, wages are improving, and, if we are fortunate, these prosperity indicators will continue and benefit all sectors of the economy and all segments of our population.

In the coming weeks, schools will welcome students back from summer break. Teachers will prepare classrooms and opening lessons, parents will be thankfully anxious about their children’s school opening experiences, and school leaders will concern themselves with policies, budgets, school buildings, and student achievement. Political figures, policy makers, parents, and educators will concern themselves with measures of school quality and the degree to which schools, districts, and states are improving, meeting the needs of students, and graduating students ready for the workplace and life. Depending on those we listen to, what we consider, and where we look, schools will be judged as exceptional, good, fair, or even poor as they welcome students for another school year.

In October, National Dropout Prevention Month, the media, educators, and certainly the National Dropout Prevention Center will remind us that nationally, only 84% of students who begin ninth grade receive a diploma four years later. We’ll be reminded that, while a few states such as Iowa, New Jersey, and West Virginia report graduation rates of 90% or higher, others such as New Mexico, Nevada, and the District of Columbia report rates in the low 70% range. We’ll be reminded that while the national graduation rate is 84%, some ethnic groups such as Black students are at only 76%, Hispanic students at only 79%, and American Indian students at only 72%. During National Dropout Prevention Month, we’ll be reminded that in some states, Hispanic students graduate at rates as much as 22% below White students, and Black students as much as 29% below white students (2015-16, National Center for Educational Statistics).

So how are economic prosperity, the schools that our students return to, the dropout issue, and our future connected? America runs on graduates, the labor supply of young people who have basic skills, job skills, people skills, and who are able to join the workforce of a thriving economy. These work-ready and life-ready graduates are produced in large numbers by effective, high quality, and efficient schools that do a good job of meeting the personal and academic needs of students, the expectations of parents, and the workforce needs of communities. Work-ready and life-ready graduates are much less likely to flow in large numbers from low-performing schools. Dropouts are almost never the work-ready and life-ready graduates that are essential to our thriving economy. Hundreds of thousands of dropouts, the 16% of every entering ninth grade class, deprive our economy of the workforce it runs on. Hundreds of thousands of dropouts, the 21% of Hispanic students who fail to graduate or the 24% of Black students who fail to graduate, further distance these segments of our population from the general economic prosperity. Unless we find a way to graduate higher numbers of work-ready and life-ready graduates who can participate in our prospering economy, we’ll lose that prosperity.

In a time of high demand for qualified workers, rising wages, and an aging and retiring population, a graduation rate of only 84% won’t sustain the economy. We all have a stake in solving our dropout problem and it’s not just a school problem. Research by the National Dropout Prevention Center indicates that only a third of the risk factors lined to dropouts are within the control of schools. The rest are in homes and in the communities. We all, educators, parents and family members, community leaders, government officials, and the business community, must familiarize ourselves with, and do our part to address, the dropout issue.

**About the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC)**  
The NDPC was begun in 1986 to serve as a clearinghouse on issues related to dropout prevention, and to offer strategies designed to increase the graduation rate in America’s schools. Over the years, the NDPC has become a well-established national resource for sharing solutions for student success. It does so through its clearinghouse function, active research and evaluation projects, publications, and through a variety of professional development activities. The organization’s website—www.dropoutprevention.org—is the nation’s leading resource in providing effective, research-based solutions to engaging students and reducing dropout. In addition, the NDPC conducts a variety of third-party evaluations and Program Assessment and Reviews (PARs) for schools and districts. By promoting awareness of successful programs and policies related to dropout prevention, the work of the Center has made an impact on education from the local to the national level.

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